

## LETTER

### ATTACKS ON LIVESTOCK BY EURASIAN GRIFFONS IN NORTHERN SPAIN

The Eurasian griffon (*Gyps fulvus*) is the most abundant of four species of vultures inhabiting the Iberian Peninsula. Its populations have greatly increased there from 1979–89 (B. Arroyo, E. Ferreiro and V. Garza 1990, II censo nacional de buitres leonados (*Gyps fulvus*). Población, distribución, demografía y conservación. ICONA, Madrid, Spain). Griffon vultures are scavengers that feed on medium- and large-sized carcasses of domestic livestock. However, D.C. Houston (1974, Food searching in griffon vultures. *E. Afr. Wildl. J.* 12:63–77), S. Cramp and K.E.L. Simmons (1980, The birds of the western Palearctic, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, U.K.), and P. Mundy et al. (1992, The vultures of Africa. Academic Press, London, U.K.) have pointed out that griffons can sometimes kill animals that are too sick or weak to protect themselves. This paper describes an observation of Eurasian griffons preying on a live sheep in La Rioja (northern Spain), and compiles information about similar cases in neighboring regions of Navarra and the Basque country.

In the late afternoon (1555 H) of 23 August 1989 in La Rioja, two hooded crows (*Corvus corone*) were seen pecking at the back of an unmoving recumbent sheep. About ten griffons stood nearby observing the crows. Suddenly the ewe got up and the crows and vultures fled. On examination of the ewe we saw that crows had pecked out one eye. Before dawn the next morning the ewe was still alive, lying with head up facing a group of about 90 vultures. A.C. watched the vultures with a 20–60× telescope until 1230 H at which time a vulture approached the ewe and pecked fleece from its back. Suddenly the mass of vultures approached and started to feed on the ewe. The ewe was very old, suffered from stagger (*Cenurus cerebralis*), and would have died in the next few days. Similar observations on predation by other griffon species have been made by A.F. Boshoff (1989, More on the cape vulture-livestock controversy. *Vulture News* 21:20–21), A. Pringle (1990, cape vultures feeding on a live cow. *Witwatersrand Bird Club News* 150:10), and P. Mundy et al. (1992, The vultures of Africa. Academic Press, London, U.K.)

We have also witnessed evidence of attacks on ewes while lambing and on newborn lambs. Ewes were found with wounds on the vulva and anus that were certified by veterinarians to be evidence that these attacks occurred. At least 5–10 attacks per year were estimated. J.L. Tellería and E. de Juana (pers. comm.) saw vultures waiting close to, but not attacking, ewes giving birth both in Navarra and Cadiz provinces.

A common practice for carrying ewes among Spanish shepherds is to tie the feet together with a rope. Both in La Rioja and in the Basque country, ewes thus tethered were preyed upon by griffons. In the latter area shepherds came upon vultures feeding on six ewes. One of the sheep had to be sacrificed and the rest died during the following days.

We think that predation by griffons occurs under famine conditions and not when food is abundant. In La Rioja, where A.C. has carried out studies on griffons since 1985, food availability has remained at about the same level over the last 9 yr. Nevertheless, it should be considered that predation by griffons is an occasional way of obtaining food.—  
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